Ethical consumer groups: coordinating individual and organisational sustainable consumption

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Abstract

The idea and practice of 'green' or 'ethical' consumption is gaining traction, increasingly seen as not only an example of consumers acting individually but as collective action and a social movement in its own right. Its focus is inherently cross-movement, aiming at environmental, social and developmental goals: we are all consumers, so ethical consumption movements can – at least in theory – affect everyone. These movements also involve different actors, crossing the public-private divide and suggesting new forms of political action and cooperation.

This research will examine the way in which ethical consumption groups coordinate action by different groups. What is these groups' role in mobilising different levels of actors, and what strategies do they use? We examine two ethical consumption groups in Belgium and the UK which both influence and reflect the shifting boundaries of the environmental movement. Through document analysis and original interviews we find that groups are key to coordinating and framing ethical consumption by individuals and authorities, providing technical and legitimising information to link aspects of the environmental movement to consumption. Greater insight into the strategies used by ethical consumption groups has value both for researchers of new forms of social movements and political action, as well as for authorities and companies, who can no longer ignore the effects of such movements.

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Introduction

The study of ethical consumption emerged in the 21st century to classify new forms of political action by individuals, using the market to express values or political beliefs. While ethical consumption has been extensively researched at an individual level, including individual motivations to purchase ethically produced products, the effect of groups on ethical consumption is less well-examined, despite the potential for a better understanding of how ethical consumption can fit within existing movements, and of how groups can adapt their strategies. Moreover, hand-in-hand with the trend of political consumption have arisen a number of ethical consumer organisations: organisations that are more concerned with *ethical* qualities of products – how products are made and their social or environmental impact – than characteristics such as value-for-money. These groups seem to eschew more traditional forms of contentious politics in favour of market-based action like boycotts and buycotts, and target not only individuals to participate in the movement, but also organisations and even public actors.

This paper aims to answer the question of what role ethical consumer groups play in mobilising different levels of actors, and what strategies they use to do so. It argues that ethical consumer groups affect three dimensions of social movements. First, they change the strategies used by moving politics to the marketplace, as previously explored in literature on political consumerism. Second, they change the level of action by both individualising this market-based action and broadening it to the institutional sphere. Finally, they cross movements by bridging social and environmental issues and including them under the heading of 'ethical' or 'sustainable'. In doing so, ethical consumer organisations play a coordinating role by bridging strategies and levels for action.

We will first establish the current literature on ethical consumerism and individualised political action, before the work on organisation-level ethical consumerism. We then introduce our framework of the strategies encouraged by ethical consumer organisations before examining two case studies to explore the role played by such groups.

Ethical consumerism: individualised, market-based political action

Ethical consumerism (also known as political, green, conscious, sustainable or eco-consumerism)[2] uses the marketplace as a political arena by linking products and processes with politics and aiming to achieve political goals through consumption. This includes not only boycotts, used since before the 19th century by social movements and unions, but also the newer form of 'buycotting': purchasing

[2] There are, of course, differences between the terms, as 'green' and 'eco' consumerism are narrower concepts than ethical, political or conscious consumerism. This paper chooses to use the term 'ethical consumerism' as it is widely used in the literature, and broad enough to capture the different facets of the movement and these groups.

specific brands or types of good over others, for example eco-labelled, fair trade or local products (Friedman 1996).

The rise of ethical consumerism fits with other theoretical developments in political participation and action: it can be seen as a form of informal, non-institutionalised 'sub-politics' (Beck 1997) a new means of participation which arose in the 20th century due to governments' reduced power compared to transnational corporations in the age of globalisation (Koos 2012; Micheletti & Stolle 2007; Vázquez 2014). This global nature of environmental problems, which makes traditional forms of political action less effective, is also highlighted by theories of ecological modernisation, which highlights the need for new ways of environmental governance (Mol 2000). Some of these new forms of governance are explored in the literature on private regulation and global governance, which are used to cover the 'global governance deficit' due to globalisation (Mayer & Gereffi 2010; Vogel 2009).

As work on the history of ethical consumption demonstrates (Haydu & Kadanoff 2010; Lang & Gabriel 2005; Micheletti 2003), the use of market strategies like boycotts with a specific target is not a new phenomenon. However, new forms of ethical consumption include more sustained calls for consumers to take environmental or social values into account when making everyday purchases. These new actions are part of a new type of personalised, 'transformative' lifestyle movement (Haenfler et al. 2012), which is based on 'individualised collective action': citizens are not necessarily part of any political group, creating their own individual political aims and working outside of traditional political channels (Micheletti 2003, p.27). Political responsibility thus lies at an individual level rather than in a political party or group (Stolle & Micheletti 2013, p.25). Even if, as suggested by Holzer (2006), ethical consumerism is perceived rather as 'collectivised individual action', the point remains that it is based firmly on individual political action which is somehow aggregated at the group level.

Moreover, ethical consumerism blurs the boundary between political (state) and economic (market) spheres. Products and production processes are politicised, and the market becomes an arena for political action, as companies are seen to be responsible for environmental or social goals. However, ethical consumerism is not incompatible with state-based political action: studies have shown that ethical consumers are also more interested in traditional politics and more politically active (Vázquez 2014), indicating that ethical consumerism may act as a 'bridge' for people to get involved in more traditional forms of political action (Willis & Schor 2012). The two types of political action are therefore not mutually exclusive – and ethical consumption can fit within traditional social movement strategies and studies.

Groups in ethical consumerism

There are two main limitations of ethical consumption as a political strategy established in the literature. First, any consumption-based action is limited by consumerist modes of functioning,

limiting 'free choice': consumers can usually only choose from among the products offered to them by producers and their market power is therefore inherently limited (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011). Second, individual consumers' purchasing power is far too small to have any effect on the market as a whole or to pose a threat to firms whose behaviour they may be trying to change (Holzer 2006). Groups are therefore very important for *individual* ethical consumerism to be scaled up enough to have any effect or be noticed by the market, and initial studies have shown that communities can play a role in enabling ethical consumption (Papaoikonomou & Alarcon 2015).

Much sociological work has focused on the 'signalling' role of groups, which translate consumers individualised purchases into political or market demands by signalling them to companies, reflecting ethical consumerism's nature as 'collectivised individual action' (Holzer 2006). By framing individual acts in terms of ethical consumption, consumers' demands become visible as a sort of collective action vis-à-vis the market (Dubuisson-Quellier 2015). Groups do this by providing information to consumers; however, they do not indiscriminately target consumers, but rather target people who are already interested in ethical consumption, providing them with information to be able to translate their beliefs into actual purchases (Clarke et al. 2007). By reporting these purchases to public authorities, groups demonstrate the (perceived) power of ethical consumption.

Groups have also been highlighted as important players in establishing and regulating eco-labelling schemes. Environmental movement organisations play a role in both developing eco-labels and in encouraging ethical consumerism, working both on the 'back' and 'frontstage' to aggregate and represent consumers (Boström & Klintman 2011). Environmental groups, for example, helped to encourage the adoption and the use of Swedish ecolabels (Micheletti 2003) and play an important role in pushing companies to adopt ecolabels and in helping to mainstream those labels once off the ground (Marx 2008; Vogel 2009). In the literature, groups are thus seen to be important in enabling individual ethical consumerism in two ways: both providing information to consumers and signalling their intentions to the market, and by participating in the development of institutions for ethical consumption.

However, there are also some difficulties in studying ethical consumerism. First, the actual effect of boycotts, buycotts and other ethical consumerist strategies is difficult to determine or measure: is a boycott effective if it has an impact, if it creates media attention, or for another reason (Baron 2003)? For this reason, this paper does not aim to find the effect of new ethical consumerist strategies, rather focusing on the range of strategies that are now used within the movement. A more significant problem is the difficulties created by the variety of motivations for what may exhibit as ethical consumption: research shows that many consumers are motivated by self-interest when purchasing organic and fair-trade products (Devinney et al. 2010; Eckhardt et al. 2010; Micheletti & Stolle 2012; Stolle & Micheletti 2013). Nonetheless, the 'true' motivations of consumers may be less important if, as suggested by the research on ethical consumer groups outlined above, the signalling of consumer actions to the market

and their 'translation' into political messages is what has an effect. In any case, for the purposes of this research this should not pose a problem: we aim to look at groups' role and strategies to target individuals, rather than individual ethical consumption. Whether or not individual consumers take up the strategies or opportunities presented to them by groups – and the reasons why – are not as important for this paper as *how* groups attempt to make them do so.

Ethical consumerism has therefore been widely studied at an individual level, and to a lesser extent at a group level. The next section will outline the fledgling work on ethical consumption at an institutional or organisational level – ethical public and private procurement – and the role of social movement organisations in encouraging and facilitating it.

Ethical consumerism at the organisational and institutional level

Ethical consumerism at the organisational level has not been studied as much as at the individual level, but both public and private entities (i.e. private organisations and public institutions) can be ethical consumers through their procurement policies.

Using public procurement for social means is not a new practice; it has been used throughout the 20th century, including during the civil rights movement in the US and as part of the boycotts of South Africa during apartheid (McCrudden 2004). More recent trends of cities taking political action through procurement include 'Fair Trade cities' (public procurement guidelines that include Fair Trade labelled products) and, while not entirely procurement-based TTIP/CETA-free zones. The growing awareness and use of public procurement for social and environmental means is also reflected in public policy: the UN, OECD and World Bank have all promoted taskforces to help develop guidelines for sustainable public procurement policies (Stolle & Micheletti 2013). The EU has been at the forefront of this movement towards sustainable procurement, publishing its voluntary Green Public Procurement initiative in 2008 and guidelines for socially responsible public procurement two years later; many EU countries have also developed legal approaches to the inclusion of social issues in public procurement policies (European Commission 2010). Although public procurement may be a blunter tool than individual ethical consumption because of certain legal restrictions, this may be made up for by scale: the amount spent on public procurement is far greater than on consumer goods, and government policies can potentially change businesses' view of the economic success of producing ethical products (Micheletti 2003). Case-studies have shown the power of such scale: governments can be an important driver of eco-labelling schemes both by supporting them politically and through the market, public procurement (Gulbrandsen 2006). Moreover, local authorities can be political actors in their own right both in implementing their public procurement policies and in lobbying at higher (national) levels for new legislation (Ylönen 2016). It is thus clear from an overview of current

policies that ethical or green public procurement is increasingly commonplace and endorsed by governments.

In the academic literature, ethical public procurement has mostly written about in food policy, particularly school meals. This is a key area where local authorities have been in charge of procurement, and concerns for both public health and the environment have encouraged a move towards locally sourced, organic meals for schoolchildren (Morgan & Sonnino 2007). This procurement is often studied from a purely economic perspective, despite calls to view ethical public procurement as a scaled-up form of ethical consumerism (Micheletti 2003; Kleine & Brightwell 2015). Like ethical consumerism, however, the nature of this social (or green) public procurement is extending beyond food as supply chains become outsourced, longer and transnational, to include eco-labelled products and more complex issues. Legal challenges have ruled that only certain restrictions can be placed, and that they must be non-discriminatory (i.e. governments can require eco-certification, but cannot specify a particular label, even if these labels have different criteria) (Ylönen 2016). In the EU in particular, public procurement policies have run into some legal problems regarding non-discrimination in procurement and the effect on legal certainty (for an overview, see Morgan & Sonnino 2007) and development of such policies therefore require a certain amount of know-how. However, given the highly local nature of procurement – particularly for locally-sourced or organic products, for example – it is also difficult to aim for broader-scale procurement laws, so local authorities must take charge of public procurement themselves (ibid). NGOs can therefore become important gatekeepers in procurement processes, providing technical and legal knowledge to local authorities who would otherwise lack the knowledge necessary to draft legal and successful policy.

In contrast to public procurement, there is a relative lack of academic research on private organisations and companies' procurement strategies, even though the purchasing strategies of large businesses may have just as much – if not more – impact than that of a local authority. The majority of writing on green private procurement falls into the managerial field, examining the drivers of, barriers to and performance impacts of green procurement as an economic strategy (Appolloni et al. 2014) and unlike public procurement, it has not been framed in terms of ethical consumption.

Strategies of ethical consumer groups

The above review of the literature hints at how ethical consumerism has changed the nature of social movement activism by not only expanding action to the market sphere, but also by creating opportunities for institutions or organisations to act as ethical consumers through public procurement. The new levels and strategies for action are outlined in the schema below. Political action can now take place in one of two spheres: either targeting the state/government (as in

traditional social movement studies or studies of contentious politics) or the market (as examined by ethical consumerism); and action is possible either by individuals or by institutions or organisations.

Table 1 Strategies for action in the literature

	State-based political action	**Market (ethical consumerist) action**
Individual level	Traditional social movement strategies/contentious politics: petitions, protests, letter-writing campaigns, etc.	Ethical consumerism: boycotts, buycotts
Institutional/organisational level	Cities as political actors: local authorities advocating at a national level (for e.g. procurement policies); companies advocating for public policy	Public procurement and ethical consumerism: environmental/social clauses in public procurement policies

Where and how do ethical consumer groups fit into this scheme of potential political actions? While all four types of actions may of course be encouraged by these groups, it is also possible that certain groups create a niche for themselves by specialising in one type of action. To what extent do ethical consumer groups combine the different spheres and levels of action, and what effect does this have on the environmental movement? These questions will be addressed in the following two case studies.

Case studies

Method

The framework of individualised and institutionalised lobbying strategies outlined above will be examined in the context of two case studies. Given the exploratory nature of this research, these case studies have been selected as two examples of ethical consumer organisations – which are a reasonably niche type of organisation. That said, they do differ in several points and therefore provide enough variation to allow us to further develop the framework of strategies.

Both groups studied (Ecoconso from Belgium and Ethical Consumer from the UK) are over 10 years old, so have developed large enough action repertoires and led several campaigns that can be studied. While the organisations have a similar goal, they differ notably in their active issues, funding sources and how radical they are (see the table below for an outline). Data has been gathered through an analysis of each groups' websites, published documents (e.g. position papers, press releases, newsletters) and personal interviews and email correspondence with group representatives.

Each case study will first outline the background of the consumer organisation, before highlighting the individual and institutionally-oriented work that they do, focusing on one active campaign in more detail. After this, we will conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for the framework.

Ecoconso (Belgium)

The Belgian (Walloon) organisation Ecoconso was formed in 2003 to inform consumers about ethical consumption. Today it is the lead organisation of the 'Reseau Eco-consommation', which was established in 1991 to group local consumer initiatives into a searchable network. Ecoconso is itself made up of several environmental and consumer member organisations, as well as belonging to other networks of environmental and social NGOs (notably Inter-Environnement Wallonie, the umbrella environmental advocacy group for Wallonia, and AchACT, the Walloon Clean Clothes Campaign group).

Individual consumers

Ecoconso's main aim is to mobilise consumers through public campaigns, educational workshops and information sessions. In addition, each year the association runs a project focusing on a different aspect of green consumption (e.g. labelling, waste reduction, avoiding plastic). It is important to note that Ecoconso is almost entirely government-funded – with some funds coming from the workshops that it presents (Ecoconso 2016). This means that it relates with individuals on an ad-hoc basis, providing services and information without any official subscription or membership.

One of the main ways that Ecoconso provides information to individual consumers is its advice service, which allows consumers to telephone or email with any questions they may have on how to make their consumption more environmentally friendly (for example, help in choosing the most efficient or ecological insulation material). In 2015 the organisation received 411 questions via telephone or online, 70% of which were from individual consumers (the rest were from organisations or companies) (Ecoconso 2016). It also held 71 workshops for groups of individual consumers, in addition to regularly publishing factsheets and newsletters about green consumption.

Moroeover, Ecoconso uses the traditional media tactics to spread information. The group has a partnership with Walloon newspapers and TV channels and thus appears regularly in these media: in 2015, the organisation appeared 26 times on television, 12 times on radio and 53 times in print newspapers (Ecoconso 2016). While the aim is to garner support for the groups' goals and encourages green consumption, publicity focuses specifically on the actions that consumers can take at home rather than being framed as actions that are taken to be part of a group. This corresponds with previous work on how media and ethical consumption can interact (Clarke et al. 2007).

Ecoconso also coordinates information exchanges among consumers. One example is the *Portes Ouvertes Ecobatisseurs* (Eco-builders' Open Houses), which were established in Wallonia in 2013.[i] This is a weekend where individual consumers can visit the houses of people who have used environmentally

friendly building or renovation techniques: not only can they see them in practice, but they can talk to the homeowners about what options exist and how they made their decision. These weekends saw almost 1000 people visit 77 open houses in 2015, an initiative which is supported by Ecoconso's research for the website *Suivez le guide* (Follow the guide), which informs consumers about ecological building materials (Ecoconso 2016).

Networks of consumers are also coordinated with the Reseau des Consommateurs Responsables, which provides a list of all consumer cooperative initiatives in Wallonia, and through participation in the project *Quartiers Durables Citoyens* (Sustainable Citizens' Neighbourhoods). The project, run by Bruxelles-Environnement, works with grassroots groups of citizens to develop sustainable initiatives throughout Brussels, including projects such as shared vegetable gardens, public spaces and playgrounds and community composting.[ii]

Ecoconso's work with individual consumers is thus based on providing information and coordinating projects with networks of consumers. In this way, it differs from more traditional environmental organisations which use political lobbying, as it only links to petitions and actions of member organisations rather than doing political lobbying itself, for which it relies on Inter-Environnement Wallonie.[iii]

Work for public buyers

The main work that Ecoconso has performed for public buyers is its *Achats Verts* (Green Purchases) website, which was run in collaboration with the Flemish environmental organisation Bond Beter Leefmilieu.[iv] *Achats Verts* provided a ranking of brands and products based on their environmental impact, particularly of office equipment and other products often purchased by public buyers. The website also included newsletters and information sheets about public buying, including to-do lists of how to incorporate environmental clauses within purchasing or procurement strategies more generally, as well as for specific areas such as clothes and pesticide-free gardening. The second publication as part of the *Achats Verts* campaign extended the scope beyond environmental issues to include 'socially responsible' purchasing, specifically for work uniforms and clothing (Ecoconso & AchACT 2012). While the *Achats Verts* website is no longer kept up to date, the two organisations now run the replacement site *Topten.be*, which runs on a similar principle as part of an EU-funded and Europe-wide project.

In addition to this website, Ecoconso runs a helpdesk and consultancy service for sustainable public markets in Brussels together with CONDUCO (an ecological consultancy). The helpdesk provides services to help public buyers and authorities to include green public procurement clauses in their policies, including legal advice about the types of clauses

are most useful and effective at different stages of the drafting process (Ecoconso 2016). It also holds separate workshops for public buyers, and runs programs for the Walloon and Brussels governments on sustainable public procurement, building networks of green suppliers and establishing ethical consumption at different levels of government.

The importance of public authorities as a driver for eco-consumption can be seen through an analysis of the publication *Mode d'emploi de l'achat public écologique* (Manual for ecological public purchasing), the first publication of the *Achats Verts* campaign (2010). The document provides a guide for authorities and public buyers on how to draft green procurement policies, providing legal and technical tips. It directly links public procurement and purchasing to individual consumers' concerns: the consumers 'expect public authorities (especially local) to show coherence and engagement in initiatives for "responsible consumption"' (p. 11).[v] This means not only acting as policy makers to 'provide momentum and coordinate actions' (for example by supporting labelling programs, facilitating recycling and other individual behaviours) but also as responsible consumers themselves in their public purchasing. These two roles are moreover supported and facilitated by Ecoconso, which both provides practical product guides through *Achats Verts* (Topten.be), and technical advice on drafting public procurement clauses themselves, with CONDUCO.

Campaign: Le plastique, c'est pas automatique!

Ecoconso's 2016 campaign was named *Le plastique, c'est pas automatique!* (Plastic isn't automatic!). This campaign focused on plastic, its harmful effects on the environment and health, and encouraged ways to avoid plastic in everyday life, including alternative products and materials to use. The campaign consisted of two main parts.

First, individual-targeted information is provided on the organisation's website. Factsheets were published specifically on the topic, often related to the time of year (e.g. avoiding plastic in school supplies in September, plastic-free Christmas presents…), and previously published factsheets on similar topics were also collected on one central webpage.

Moreover, Ecoconso organised workshops on the topic: both regular workshops that deal with waste and plastics (including recycling and avoiding waste in the supermarket) and one specific workshop developed for the campaign itself. All initiatives – as well as appearances in the news and related resources – were collected onto the main campaign page.[vi]

As Ecoconso's individual and public-purchasing campaigns are separate, there was no specific action taken for organisations or authorities as part of their plastics campaign, although the subject is addressed in their work with authorities on waste management and purchasing office supplies and there are also links on the main campaign page to these.

Ethical Consumer Research Association (UK)

The Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA, or simply Ethical Consumer) was founded in 1989, such early days of the contemporary ethical consumer movement that its founder was advised not to use the word 'consumer' in the title for fear of presenting too narrow a view of the organisation's actions (Harrison et al. 2005, p.50). Ethical Consumer is a not-for-profit cooperative, which works extensively with other NGOs and organisations on various projects and aims to make companies more sustainable by using consumer pressure. As one of the first and most well-established ethical consumer groups and the main one in the UK, Ethical Consumer has attracted previous academic attention, especially on its product guides, which were one of the first to rank products in terms of ethics instead of criteria such as value-for-money (Clarke et al. 2007; Harrison et al. 2005).

Individual consumers

Ethical Consumer's work has always focused mainly on individual consumers. It aims to empower consumers by providing them with information and the tools to make purchases based on their own ethics, and to be able to change companies' actions through this market pressure (Ethical Consumer 2014). Unlike Ecoconso, Ethical Consumer is member-based and funded through two channels: through the member-stakeholders of the cooperative, and through magazine subscriptions.

ECRA's main service is the publication of a bimonthly magazine with brand and company rankings for different products, ranked not only in terms of environmental sustainability but also other ethical factors including animal welfare, involvement in controversial technology (nuclear, biotechnology), use of palm oil and tax evasion. The format of the magazine, published since 1989, has been adapted for online use, with product guides that are regularly updated and which can be 'tailored' using sliding scales according to one's personal ethics to rank which issues are most important.

Information is also provided to consumers via a weekly newsletter, the blog section of the website and other regular updates on social media. Moreover, the website provides forums for consumers to ask questions or advice both from Ethical Consumer and to other consumers. Finally, Ethical Consumer holds an annual conference which brings together different groups – company representatives, NGOs, local politicians, academics and individual consumers – to discuss different issues around ethical consumption.

Despite the focus on ethical consumption, Ethical Consumer highlights in its mission statement that it sees ethical consumption 'not [as] a replacement for other forms of political action' but as an 'important additional way for people to exert their influence'.[vii] For each category for which it produces

a product guide, it therefore also provides links to other political campaigns around the issue, including to petitions or other organisations to support.

Public buyers

Ethical Consumer has a history of campaigning for both ethical public procurement and procurement by organisations, and providing technical advice to facilitate this. The organisation first advocated for ethical procurement long before the topic reached the public agenda, with a 1991 report on local councils and ethical buying and follow-up campaigns.[viii] Its 2001 manifesto to the UK government included recommendations for an ethical public procurement strategy, urging the government to create a Public Sector Responsible Purchasing Act. Interestingly, in its 2007 review of the Manifesto, Ethical Consumer noted that while the EU and UK had indeed written sustainable procurement plans, these were focused on *sustainability* rather than *ethics*, under which they include workers' rights and other social issues. This demonstrates the organisations' broader view of 'ethics' encompassing environmental and social values.

Post-2007, the group has focused its campaigning on one specific aspect of public procurement: the fair tax campaign, against tax avoidance by corporations. After lead-in campaigns including a boycott of Amazon for tax avoidance from 2013 onwards, it established the Fair Tax Mark – certification for companies that they pay full taxes – with the NGO Tax Justice Network in 2015. In 2016 the organisations and Christian Aid ran the Sourced campaign, which encouraged local authorities to include tax issues as a criterion in public procurement strategies by incorporating the Fair Tax Mark,[ix] echoing the 'Fairtrade towns' campaigns where Fairtrade labels are used in local public procurement strategies(Malpass et al. 2007; Ylönen 2016). At least 15 local governments decided to change their public procurement policies, including the Northern Ireland Assembly (Christian Aid 2017). The Fair Tax Mark was referred to by the European Parliament as a potential way to prevent tax avoidance (European Parliament 2015), and the UK government has since made tax avoidance and evasion a mandatory criterion in local public procurement (Crown Commercial Service 2016). The campaign is therefore an example of how the organisation links social issues (fair tax) with environmental ones (sustainable public procurement), as well as combining different ways of taking action (their manifesto for public procurement, compared to creating a label themselves).

In addition to campaigning on public procurement, Ethical Consumer also provides direct help to non-governmental organisational purchasers, especially charities and NGOs. It has assisted them in developing their ethical buying policies, providing legal and technical advice, although they did this more frequently in the past: nowadays, it more often provides screenings of potential suppliers, partners or investment targets based on ethical issues, with the focus on the issues that the client finds

important.[x] Alternatively, companies can also subscribe to ECRA's own database of company files to be able to create their own scoring and track companies that they may want to work with.

Finally, Ethical Consumer publishes the Ethical Markets Report annually (currently in collaboration with Triodos Bank), which is used in academic research and by government for their ethical market research. This is also a means to gain media attention for the 'cause' of ethical consumption (as well as for the group itself) (Clarke et al. 2007).

Campaign: Stop the Cull (Badger Campaign)

Badger culling began in the UK in 2013 as part of the government's strategy to reduce bovine tuberculosis in cattle. Opposition to the badger culling is widespread among environmental and animal welfare NGOs, and an independent scientific body has advised against the cull (Hirst 2017). Ethical Consumer has been running the Stop the Cull each summer since the culls started, in collaboration with Lush Cosmetics.

Ethical Consumer has played a largely coordinating role in the campaign, with their main role being to 'put information out there'.[xi] It runs the Badger Action News website, which is an online newspaper tracking other campaigns on the issue, especially local campaigns in the counties where culls are being carried out. Its website suggests five ways for individuals to take part in the campaign: by boycotting, donating to relevant organisations, lobbying MPs, petitioning, and protesting. Badger Action News provides links to the websites of organisations which are working on the issue, allowing consumers to take part as they wish.

Aside from the coordinating work, Ethical Consumer has provided help in the form of research. In 2014, Ethical Consumer researched which milk producers, retailers and cafes were sourcing milk from the culling zones and created a brand ranking of different brands of milk and dairy based on companies' sourcing policies.[xii] Alongside this it encouraged a full boycott of dairy to protest the culling of badgers for cattle. Subsequently, in 2015 it commissioned GIS mapping of the cull zones (whose locations are not public information) as part of a research report uncovering the locations and conditions within the cull zones (Ethical Consumer 2015).

While there is no government lobbying directly by Ethical Consumer, their website links to other more traditional politically-oriented actions and thus coordinates the various ways to take action across the market and state spheres. Combined with its research and information to consumers, this allows people to take part as they wish, giving them the tools to act either through purchases or in more traditional ways.

Table 2 Ecoconso and Ethical Consumer: summary

	Ecoconso (BE)	Ethical Consumer (UK)
Founded	2003	1989
Funding source	Government; paid workshops for authorities/groups	Member-stakeholders (cooperative company); subscribers; paid work for organisations
Aims[xiii]	-Providing the public with concrete, accessible, relevant and credible information about the advantages and possibilities of eco-consumption; -Promoting eco-consumption in individuals; -Promoting structural changes to facilitate eco-consumption in groups and organisations; -Providing services to inform, raise awareness and support eco-consumption.	To make global businesses more sustainable through consumer pressure, by: -Helping consumers to challenge corporate power; -Democratising the market; -Providing transparent research; -Helping consumers to let companies know (directly contact companies); -Help consumers to take wider political action by linking to other campaigns.
State-based political action	None	Limited
Market-based political action	Campaigns encouraging buycotts	Campaigns encouraging boycotts (against companies) and buycotts
Clients/members	No direct members. Clients are both individuals (subscribers and users of the website) and organisations and municipal governments	Individuals (subscribers); organisations (for ethical policy-making advice)

Discussion

The above case studies have highlighted several similarities in the way that these ethical consumer organisations work – and their implications for the environmental movement more broadly in terms of the values that they espouse, the strategies that they use and their targets.

First, both organisations focus on issues beyond purely environmental topics: Ethical Consumer focuses on a wide range of topics and values, including tax avoidance and animal welfare. Even Ecoconso, which is focused mainly on 'eco-consumption', also provides information on labels such as Fair Trade and on the social aspects of local production, collaborative consumption. Because of the individual nature of ethical consumption, these groups remain very flexible and their issues go beyond environmental and health concerns. This individual, flexible nature is highlighted by the tailorable 'sliders' found on Ethical Consumer's website: everybody's version of consuming ethically is different, depending on which issues they consider to be most important. As the organisation explains, 'everybody has their own unique set of ethics and beliefs', so product guides should be personalised.[xiv]

Second, both organisations focus on market-based lobbying rather than lobbying in the state sphere. Out of the range of state- and market-based strategies that we first identified, the organisations choose to use their resources on encouraging market action and focus on state action only as a secondary route. Ecoconso makes this choice because it can be a more moderate strategy; by staying moderate they can

be heard by as many people as possible, helping them to 'progress in eco-consumption' (Leroy 2009). Ethical Consumer, on the other hand, takes a more radical route – encouraging boycotts against specific companies rather than a more general boycott/eco-purchasing – but it makes this strategic choice for another reason. It aims to 'empower consumers' and believes that giving consumers the information to make an ethical purchase is the most 'direct form of intervention', compared to petitioning government or writing to an MP, which is 'one step removed'.[xv]

Their focus on market strategies means that both organisations provide information to enable action; this information can help to overcome the inevitable information asymmetries that consumers face within a market and the invisible nature of the credence values of a product (including how it was produced) (Harrison et al. 2005; Koos 2012). As Ethical Consumer themselves point out on their website, the majority of the work they do is secondary research which could also be done individually – but most consumers do not have time to do this and appreciate another source of information. Moreover, in contrast to most social movement organisations, Ethical Consumer provides information even about boycotts and campaigns organised by other groups that they do not endorse (Ethical Consumer 2014). This information provision means that they play a rather coordinating role in researching opportunities for individuals to act and providing them with the necessary information to do so – reinforced by the structure of both organisations' websites, which are dominated by factsheets and product guides rather than policy papers or petitions.

Finally, both organisations provide this information and technical advice to organisations and institutions as well as consumers. This indicates the dual role that governments can play in facilitating ethical consumption more generally through politics, and acting as an ethical consumer themselves through public procurement. It is also interesting that both organisations work to help companies develop purchasing policies, when this has not received as much academic or public attention.

Referring back to our table of potential action by ethical consumer groups, it was found that these groups coordinate both organisational and individual action – but that they focus their resources on market-based action. The only state-based action that the groups promote are through links to petitions and actions by other organisations. However, this does not indicate that political consumerist strategies are incompatible with traditional political action, as both organisations see their market-based work as building on action in the political sphere; rather, it highlights the choices that these groups make to create a niche type of action for themselves, retain a more moderate strategy and survive on the resources that they have.

Conclusion

This research has explored two case studies of ethical consumer groups to examine the ways in which they can act as 'brokers' which 'build bridges between consumers and business actors and institutions'

(Micheletti 2003). They do this by not only broadening the issues included in the environmental movement, but also by encouraging, facilitating and coordinating individual and institutional action by providing information to help ethical consumption. Interestingly, ethical consumption by private companies is a point of emphasis of both ethical consumer groups studied, highlighting that this topic – which has received scant academic attention – may be an interesting focus for future research on groups and ethical consumerism.

One factor that has emerged from this research is funding source and its potential effect on groups' strategies. Source of resources has been acknowledged as a factor which affects how radical groups' strategies are (McCarthy & Zald 1977); however, whether and how this applies to market-based political action is unclear. At first glance, getting funding from the government would seem to have less of an effect on strategy as groups take market-based action against corporations rather than the government itself. Nonetheless, this study seems to indicate that it may have an effect: Ecoconso's government funding and lack of members means that it sees its role as appealing to as broad an audience as possible, while Ethical Consumer's membership and independence means that it can choose a more radical, niche and potentially confrontational strategy. Future research should examine how and why funding source and membership type affect the strategies that groups choose in the market as well as in the political sphere.

These case studies do have limitations as they are both specific ethical consumer groups. Further research may expand the scope of the framework built up here to compare how different types of groups – for example, environmental or social NGOs – may use market-based or state-based action differently, and in what ways the two could be combined. It may also explore how strategies of ethical consumer groups have spread to social movements more generally – for example the publishing of ethical product guides by various environmental movement organisations – and the effect that this blending of movements has on participation and engagement. It is clear that ethical consumerism is a form of political action that is changing how and on what political action takes place, and more research on the topic should aim to fill the gap that has emerged between studies of social movements, interest groups, and new forms of political participation.

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[i] See Ecobatisseurs website, http://www.ecobatisseurs.be/.
[ii] Quartiers Durables Citoyens, http://www.quartiersdurablescitoyens.be/.
[iii] Email correspondence with author, 4 October 2016.
[iv] Achats Verts, http://www.ecoconso.be/achatsverts/.
[v] Original: 'les consommateurs attendent également que les autorités publiques (et a fortiori locales) fassent preuve de cohérence et d'engagement dans les initiatives prises pour des « consommations responsables'.
[vi] Le plastique, c'est pas automatique, http://www.ecoconso.be/fr/campagne-plastique.
[vii] *Ibid.*
[viii] Ethical Consumer manifesto, http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/aboutus/ourmission/ourmanifesto.aspx.
[ix] Sourced Campaign, Christian Aid, http://www.christianaid.org.uk/ActNow/tax-justice/sourced/sourced-index.aspx.
[x] Personal interview, 17 January 2017.
[xi] *Ibid*.
[xii] Badger Action News, http://badgeractionnews.org/take-action/boycotts/.
[xiii] All information in this table is from the mission and manifesto pages of Ecoconso (http://www.ecoconso.be/fr/presentations-et-missions) and Ethical Consumer (http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/aboutus/ourmission.aspx).
[xiv] Ethical Consumer, Ethics made easy - a simple way to find the products that reflect your principles. http://www.ethicalconsumer.org/home/quickguide.aspx
[xv] Personal interview, 17 January 2017.